THE
BOISI CENTER REPORT

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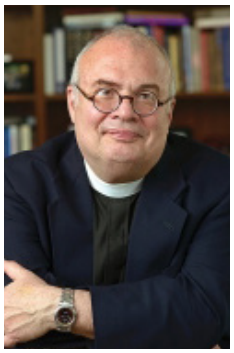
FROM THE DIRECTOR



Friends:

The Boisi Center was busy this spring with a number of exciting events. Elizabeth Johnson (distinguished professor emerita of theology at Fordham University) delivered the 18th annual "Prophetic Voices" lecture to a capacity crowd on February 28th. Her lecture—entitled, "The Challenge of 'Us' in Ecological Times"—offered a compelling overview of her two most recent books (both on the theological import of the current ecological crisis), but also sounded a call for a new kind of religious crusade for believers of all faiths to struggle on behalf of our planet. Her call was greeted with a standing ovation from the audience.

Amey Victoria Adkins-Jones (Boston College) and filmmaker Martin Doblmeier (the award-winning documentary producer) took part in a screening of Doblmeier's film, Backs Against the Wall: The Howard Thurman Story. After the screening (which was subsequently shown on PBS stations across the country), Adkins-Jones and Doblmeier offered gripping commentary on the importance of Thurman for the development of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s beliefs about civil rights and racial equality, and Thurman's long-term influence on seminary students at Boston University's School of Theology (at which Thurman was a faculty member and King a student). A lively conversation with audience members followed.

Our four "Luncheon Colloquia" this semester drew interested attendees both from within Boston College and from the broader Boston community. Elizabeth Antus (Boston College) spoke to a full room on, "It was Simply the End of What I Could Bear: Resetting Christian Theology on Mental Illness and Suicide." A number of persons present offered deeply moving family and personal stories on the topic. Natana Delong-Bas (Boston College)—herself one of the most respected theological voices studying Islam in the United States—spoke on "What Everyone Needs to Know About Shariah." Scholars from within BC and from neighboring universities entered into an enlightening series of conversations with Delong-Bas after her presentation. Nancy Ammerman (Boston University) offered a wonderful reflection on what has become her life's work: the study of "Lived Religion" in the United States. Ammerman's talk, entitled "Religion and the Whole Human Experience," offered compelling insights from an accomplished scholar acclaimed as the most respected voice in this new approach to the study of religion "on the ground." Finally, Ward Holder and Peter Josephson (both of St. Anselm College) offered intriguing comments on "What Would President Niebuhr Do? Applying Niebuhrian Thought to Contemporary Politics." Both scholars are past masters on this topic, having produced a number of important studies on the towering Protestant theologian Reinhold Niebuhr.

On April 8th the Boisi Center moved its base from Chestnut Hill to the North Shore of Boston for a very well-attended event, co-sponsored with Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. Randall Balmer (Dartmouth College) and John Fea (Messiah College) took part in a spirited conversation with myself on the topic of "Politics and Evangelical Christians." After the panel conversation, a number of audience members questioned all three panelists.

Ken Woodward, religion editor for Newsweek magazine for three decades, offered the 2nd annual Wolfe Lecture (named in honor of the Center's founding director, Alan Wolfe) on March 14th. Woodward offered timely insights on "Religion in the White House" (also the topic of one of his recent books) to an enthusiastic audience.

In addition to our major events and seminars, I spoke alongside fellow American religious historian Gardiner Shattuck at an exhibition opening and film screening at the Theology and Ministry Library on February 4th, entitled, "Seeking Shelter: A Story of Faith, Place, and Resistance." I spoke on the role of Jesuit activist Daniel Berrigan, S.J., and Shattuck spoke about the important role of William Stringfellow (an Episcopal lawyer) in the anti-Vietnam resistance movement, and on the friendship between Berrigan and Stringfellow that grew because of their cooperation in that important movement during the 1906s. Finally, rounding off our busy programs and events, we concluded two faculty seminars and one graduate seminar for the academic year.

We have a superb but lean team here at the Boisi Center, made of up of hard-working and talented folks, so we are sorry to see our wonderful friend and colleague Jack Nuelle, interim assistant to the director at the Center, leave us at the end of this academic year. Jack and his wife Nina will be returning to their native city of Chicago, and we will miss Jack quite a bit. I know I speak for all of us in wishing Jack and Nina continued happiness and success in their married life in the City of Broad Shoulders. We'll also be saying farewell and congratulations to one of our undergraduate research fellows who has been with us for three years, Jorge, as he graduates from Boston College and heads to work at UBS bank in New York City.

We are delighted that all of you share in our exciting events at the Boisi Center, and we hope to see you next fall as we begin a new academic year examining the always-lively issues focused around religion and American public life.

~ Mark Massa, S.J.

BACKS AGAINST THE WALL: THE HOWARD THURMAN STORY

A film screening of Martin Doblmeier's new documentary was followed by a panel discussion between Amey Victoria Adkins-Jones, Mark Massa, S.J., and Doblmeier himself.

Howard Thurman is a figure who refuses to be neatly categorized. That was one main takeaway from the screening and discussion of the documentary, *Backs Against the Wall: The Howard Thurman Story*, hosted by the Boisi Center on February 7th. An influential theologian, teacher and mystic, Thurman also served as theological and ideological inspiration for the non-violent protests of the Civil Rights Movement, notably those of the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. His seminal text, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, focuses on the ways Jesus spoke truth to power and can therefore be identified closely with those marginalized by society. In addition to profiling Thurman, the film included interviews with many Civil Rights leaders, including Rev. Jesse L. Jackson, Sr., Congressman John Lewis, and Vernon E. Jordan, Jr. Following the screening was a discussion between the film's director, Martin Doblmeier, and Amey Victoria Adkins-Jones (BC theology). Moderated by Mark Massa, S.J.,

(from left to right) Mark Massa, S.J., Amey Victoria Adkins-Jones and Martin Doblmeier

the discussion opened with Doblmeier's remarks that he found Thurman to be one of the most important public faith figures of the 20th century. Adkins-Jones shared that she often teaches *Jesus and the Disinherited*, discussing how she sees Thurman as an inspirational figure. Both Doblmeier and Adkins-Jones discussed Thurman's unconventional role in the Civil Rights Movement: Thurman stayed absent from the front lines of physical protests, something he often caught criticism for. Instead of focusing on his absence, Doblmeier and Adkins-Jones argued, we should seek to understand why Thurman's intellectual and religious inspiration had such a forceful impact, albeit in an understated way. A question and answer session followed, with audience members asking the panelists to contextualize Thurman within the wider landscape of his historical moment, as well as for ideas on how to persist in the midst of racist events on Boston College's campus.

More information, links to film reviews, and photos can be found on the event page.

www.bc.edu/boisi-thurman

WHAT WOULD PRESIDENT NIEBUHR DO?

Peter Josephson and R. Ward Holder (Saint Anslem College) discuss Reinhold Niebuhr and the American situation.

Peter Josephson and R. Ward Holder, both of St. Anselm College and professor of politics and professor of theology, respectively, presented on their recent book, *Reinhold Niebuhr in Theory and Practice: Christian Realism and Democracy in America in the Twenty-First Century*, during a February 13th Boisi Center luncheon colloquium.

Holder and Josephson noted that for Niebuhr, any questioning of political problems must take on a ethical and theological dimension. Each political crisis, like the Cold War, offers an occasion to critique our own political conscience, and is an occasion for self-reflection.

During the Q&A, Holder and Josephson spoke further on Niebuhr's understanding of the virtue of a constitutional system of checks and balances.

Further reading and an interview can be found on the event page.

www.bc.edu/boisi-niebuhr

'IT WAS SIMPLY THE END OF WHAT I COULD BEAR'

Boston College's Elizabeth Antus spoke on resetting Christian theology on mental illness and suicide.

Treating suicide as an effect of mental illness, Elizabeth Antus claimed, is a way forward for Catholic moral theology, where suicide has long been seen only in terms of personal and social wrongdoing rather than as the unfortunate result of deep physical, mental, and spiritual suffering. In her February 21st luncheon colloquium, Antus, a professor of the practice of theology at Boston College, suggested ways that Catholic doctrine be reoriented to destigmatize those who die by suicide without forgetting the damage that suicide does to self, community, and society.

Elizabeth Antus addresses the crowd.

In her remarks, Antus advocated creating a space to grieve and remember well those who have died by suicide. Antus used the German Catholic theologian Johann Baptist Metz to support her argument, saying that, for Metz, theology must be conducted in the midst of theodicy. This mindset makes rightly remembering the dead essential: recognizing suffering and believing in the saving truth of God means hoping that no one is lost to God because of pain and sin. As Antus put it, we must hope that "even suicide decedents are in the communion of saints."

Catholic theology must seek to engage the issue of suicide more pastorally and with greater mercy, Antus argued. "Is it a sin to buckle?" Antus asked. If there simply is no more strength left to hold oneself upright, how can we condemn someone for faltering?

A recording of the colloquium and an interview with Antus can be found on the event page.

www.bc.edu/boisi-suicide

THE 18TH ANNUAL PROPHETIC VOICES LECTURE

Elizabeth A. Johnson, C.S.J. on "The Challenge of 'Us' in Ecological Times"

Johnson addresses an engaged crowd.

On February 28th, Elizabeth A. Johnson, C.S.J. asked this question, exposing the assumption that "us" often refers only to the human community. Johnson delivered the Boisi Center's 18th Annual Prophetic Voices Lecture to an audience of students, professors, and community members on the the topic of anthropocentric theology and its relationship to our current ecological crisis. A distinguished professor emerita of theology at Fordham University and author of, most recently, Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love (2015) and Creation and the Cross: The Mercy of God for a Planet in Peril (2019), Johnson delivered a lecture that challenged a redefining of "us" to include the entire community of life on earth, expositing the theological reasons behind a call for such a cosmological shift.

The Lecture began by discussing how the pronoun "us," with its common reference to a community comprised solely of people, must change in the face of our current ecological crisis. Relying on language originating in the arguments for the Catholic "preferential option for the poor," Johnson stated that the expansion of "us" to include all life on earth is, at its core, a theocentric option; it will teach us more about who God is. She unpacked the the reasons behind this revamp of anthropology in three parts.

Johnson first elaborated on the crisis of the natural world. The earth is our "common, shared, and only home." The increasing rate of species extinctions signals the "death of birth itself." Johnson relied on Pope Francis' Laudato si' as she argued each extinction should feel like a "personal disfigurement." Changing our understanding of the word "us" to include kinship with other species shifts our view of the world we live in, providing "a new way of being human."

Johnson then posited theological arguments for the kinship between all species. Challenging the traditional hierarchy of being, she highlighted that all of creation shares one creator, and one end, in God. Encouraged by scripture which emphasizes this kinship, Johnson argues we must "climb down from our perch" and see ourselves as simply members in the community of life. Johnson challenged that we shift our understanding from the common picture of a pyramid of species with humans at the top towards a more accurate image of the circle of life. The Genesis command to "have dominion" can, in this way, be more accurately understood as a call to be a representative for God in his love for all creation.

Diving deeper on previous points, Johnson concluded with the ways we can see direct God-animal relations. She noted that Laudato si' changed centuries of teaching by stating that animals have a value of their own, not just an instrumental value to humans. She argued, backed by scripture, that we can see a direct relationship between God and all animals, and that animals praise God by their very existence: they cry to God for food, intelligently utilize their environments, and carry out the vocation to multiply and be fruitful. We should see this praise in a critical realist sense, recalling Aquinas' old adage that things know -- and love -- according to how they are able.

Before closing with a brief Q&A, Johnson ended with one summarizing point: redrafting our sense of identity -- our theological anthropology -- awakens us to our "embeddedness with all creation." Changing how we think of "us" changes not just our view of the world, but also how we pray and live.

A video of the event, recommended readings, photos, and an interview with Elizabeth A. Johnson C.S.J. can be found on the event page.

www.bc.edu/boisi-johnson

Johnson answers an audience question.

2ND ANNUAL WOLFE LECTURE ON RELIGION AND AMERICAN POLITICS

Kenneth L. Woodward, former religion editor of Newsweek, *Religion and the White House.*

Woodward delivers his lecture in the historic debate room, Gasson Hall 305.

What is the relationship, if any, between a president's religious beliefs and policies? On Thursday, March 14th, the Boisi Center welcomed Kenneth L. Woodward, former religion editor for Newsweek, to Boston College to address this question in the 2nd Annual Wolfe Lecture on Religion and American Politics, entitled, "Religion and the White House." Woodward argued that a president's personal religious convictions have little influence over foreign or domestic policies. Instead, religion has often been used as a justification for political decisions it actually had no influence over.

Woodward opened by discussing how the stories we tell ourselves regarding national and religious identities are often wrong. While there is widespread belief that the thirteen original colonies were predominantly devout Christian communities, Woodward argued that, at best, the colonists practiced a "baptized heathenism," with only a small percent institutionally religious. Woodward pressed that religion in the colonial and revolutionary periods served a primarily social function: it molded the conscience of citizens and provided a framework for the social order.

Woodward went on to tie this instrumentalization of religion to the U.S. presidency. Woodward pressed that the president's personal religion has, primarily, been used as a tool of persuasion for already-calculated political decisions, having little causal impact on political policies themselves. Woodward offered a few examples, including President William McKinley and his dealings with the Philippines. To justify his invasion of the Philippines, McKinley instrumentalized religion by claiming that it was essential to Christianize the Filipino people, disregarding that the Philippines had been a Catholic country for over three hundred years.

Towards the end of his lecture, Woodward discussed the presidential election of 2016 and its ties to religion, especially Evangelicals. Woodward contended that Evangelicals voted for Trump in the last election for two reasons, neither of which had to do directly with their religion. First, a deep dislike and a distrust in Hillary Clinton. Second, economic hardship and anxieties about the future.

The Q&A session was dedicated to the future of the Republican party, the role of national religious figures, such as Billy Graham, and their relationships to the president, and the role of religion in the lives of young adults today.

More information, photos, and an interview with Woodward can be found on the event page.

www.bc.edu/boisi-woodward

Woodward makes a point during his lecture.

WHAT EVERYONE NEEDS TO KNOW ABOUT SHARIAH

Boston College's Natana DeLong-Bas spoke on some of the common stereotypes and fears of Shariah and Islamic law.

In the wake of the March 15th, 2019 massacre in Christchurch, New Zealand, when a white supremacist and terrorist killed 50 Muslims at prayer in two of the city's mosques, Natana DeLong-Bas' (BC theology) March 26th luncheon colloquium at the Boisi Center was timelier than ever. Her talk, adapted from her book *Shariah: What Everyone Needs to Know*, co-authored with John L. Esposito, defined *shariah* and what significance it has to Muslims around the world, and examined why misinformation about *shariah* and the Islamic faith can be dangerous in a pluralistic society.

Natana DeLong-Bas displays her recent, co-authored book.

Distinct from Islamic law, *shariah* is comprised of general principles or objectives that Muslims believe are given as divine revelation. As a result, DeLong-Bas explained, *shariah*, as a concept, does not change or develop. Islamic law, however, is the human interpretation and implementation of that divine revelation. It is a dynamic process open to reinterpretation and reform, just like Western law or even religious law in Western religious traditions.

To complement her notes on *shariah*, DeLong Bas also addressed the anti-Muslim fear and rhetoric that has been prevalent in America in the last two decades. She used statistics to prove that the majority of American Muslims do not think that religious law should be the source of civil law. She also debunked the supremecist myth that an influx of Muslim immigrants will out-populate non-Muslims in the U.S. or Europe.

DeLong-Bas concluded her presentation with a reminder that many of today's Muslims are as concerned about revising, renewing, and reinterpreting the problematic aspects of their tradition as Christians are, stressing that major schools of *shariah* and Islamic law are primarily concerned with personal development and being a good citizen. The pervasive narrative of *shariah* as a brutal, capital system of punishment is a false, often damaging narrative. The questions that followed DeLong-Bas' presentation focused on support of Muslim members of Congress like Illhan Omar, the experience of Muslim students at Boston College, and the state of 2019 U.S. policy on Muslim issues.

A recording of the colloquium and an interview can be found on the event page.

www.bc.edu/boisi-shariah

POLITICS AND EVANGELICAL CHRISTIANS

In an event held at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, John Fea, of Messiah College, and Randall Balmar, of Dartmouth College, discussed the history, ethics and effects of Evangelical Christian political involvement in the United States.

Held on April 10, 2019, "Politics and Evangelical Christians" touched on the history of Evangelicals as a political force in the United States, the dangers and problems of religious engagement with politics, and if a true understanding of evangelicalism yields a more ethical politics.

The event was co-sponsored with the Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. In a departure from the standard Boisi Center event format, Gordon Conwell also hosted the event on their South Hamiton, Massachusetts campus. The event, moderated by Boisi Center director Mark Massa, S.J., featured promient evangelical scholars and commenters John Fea, from Messiah College and Randall Balmer, from Darthmouth College. Both are firmly committed to an evangelical faith, but have severe critiques of the evangelical role in the election of Donald Trump.

The discussion began with questions about evangelicalism's historical relationship with American politics. Balmer discussed the rise of the so-called "Moral Majority" and how evangelical began to become sysnonymous with Republican voting patterns by the late 1980s. Both Fea and Balmer also explored the oft-discussed 80 percent of evangelical voters who, according to exit polls after the 2016 presidential election, voted for Donald Trump. Both called for an evangelicalism which attends more dutifully to the truth of the gospel, and puts the truth of Christ before party and country. Fea in particular expressed dismay at voting for an individual who flaunts the gospel in so many ways only for the benefit of Supreme Court judges

The question and anwer session which followed discussed potential pragmatic reasons for voting for Donald Trump, despite personal and ethical misgivings. It also touched on the importance of nuancing the term evangelicalism as an umbrella designation, as it contains many different types of belief practices and patterns.

More information can be found on the event page.

www.bc.edu/boisi-evangelicals

RELIGION AND THE WHOLE HUMAN EXPERIENCE

Nancy Ammerman, from Boston University, presented research on the human experience of religion.

In the final luncheon colloquium of the 2019-20 academic year, Nancy Ammerman, professor of sociology of religion at Boston University, discussed the ways in which humans experience religious practice, a project continuing her career focus on the phenomenon of "lived religion." Ammerman began her presentation by defining "lived religious practice" as "something more than ordinary, which often involves God or religion." It has both phenomonological and sociological valence.

She then explored this phenomenon through the lens of seven basic human capacities. First, through experiences unique to embodied inviduals, namely, the experiences of the five senses. Second, through the experience of the material, or what humans make and encounter in the world. Third, in the various types of emotion humans feel concerning religious experience, be it fear or joy. Fourth, in the aesthetic, or the moments of beauty which both signal and foster moments of transcendence. Fifth, in moral teachings, or the ways humans embody, learn, and practice

Nancy Ammerman answers an audience question.

virtue. spiritual, Sixth, through various spritual practices, often defined in terms of ecstasy or charisma. Finally, through narrative, or the sharing, through words, of stories about religious experience and religious belonging.

By linking religious experience to these very human capacities, Ammerman argued that there is something universal about the social experience of religion. She even went so far as to argue the commonalitites in religious practice occur across both intentional and unintentional practice. In other words, people are formed in religious practice through conscious participation in organized religion or other systems of worship and through the ways in which religious practice is subsumed into everyday life unconsciously. The question and answer session which followed the presentation touched on the population of people who define themselves as spiritual but not religious, how transcendence can be a common experience, and ways of engaging young people on religious questions.

More photos, recommended readings, and an interview with Ammerman can be found on the event page.

www.bc.edu/boisi-ammerman

THOMAS MERTON AND FLANNERY O'CONNOR

Two 2018-19 fculty seminars touched on the liberal arts in our current landscape and the Catholic writer Flannery O'Connor

This past academic year the Boisi Center was host to two factuly seminars. The first, entitled "Liberal Arts Education in the Age of Trump," featured a cadre of distinguished faculty from across Boston College. Its participants were: Mark Massa, S.J., director of the Boisi Center; Mary Crane, Thomas F. Rattigan Professer in the english department; Paulo Barrozo, associate professor in the Law School; Eric Weiskott, associate professor in the English Department; Eileen Sweeney, professor in the philosophy department; Eve Spangler, associate professor in the sociology department; James Weiss, associate professor in the theology department; Patricia Weitzel-O'Neill, executive director of the Barbara and Patrick Roche Center for Catholic Education; Andrew Davis, associate proefssor of Old Testament at the Boston College School of Theology and Ministry; and Franklin Harkins, associate professor of Historical Theology and Church History at the Boston College School of Theology and Ministry. The conversations at this seminar ran the gamut, from discussions about new models of education, to why students are pushed to major in STEM fields, to the the over arching question: what are the liberal arts for?

The second seminar, on the writer and Catholic Flannery O'Connor, was a natural next step from the previous evening seminar at Boisi, on the life and work of Catholic monk, writer and mystic Thomas Merton. This seminar featured an equally as interdisciplinary cast, including: Mark Massa, S.J., director of the Boisi Center; Jeffrey Bloechl, associate professor in the philosophy department, Catherine Cornille, Professor and Newton College Alumnae Chair of Western Culture in the theology department; André Brouillette, S.J., assistant professor of Systematic and Spiritual Theology at the Boston College School of Theology and Ministry; Sheila Gallagher, associate professor of studio art in the art, art history, and film department; Kimberly Garcia, who teaches creative writing in the english department; Andrew Prevot, associate professor in the theology department; James O'Toole, professor and Clough Millennium Chair in the history department; Candace Hetzner, Associate Dean for Academic Affairs in the Morrissey College; Jack Nuelle, interim assistant to the director at the Boisi Center; and Mary Elliot, Boisi Center graduate research assistant. The seminar was a lively examination of O'Connor's work, technique, and theology from various disciplinary perspectives.

VOCATION IN THE AMERICAN IMAGINATION

Ninth Annual Graduate Symposium on Religion and Politics

The fall semester of the Boisi Center's 19th Annual Graduate Symposium on Religion and Politics concluded with a session on the history of "broken work" and slavery, including discussions of the implications of that legacy today. The spring semester's meetings opened with readings from Jim Cullen's The American Dream to round out the tour de force of American ideas around vocation, with graduate student in history, Laurel Teal, leading. What happens when "the idea of easy living" captures the national imagination from out west, replacing the Protestant work ethic that had shaped much of American history – economic and otherwise – up to that point?

The next session, led by graduate students Eryn Gammonley (political science) and Clarke Mitchell (philosophy), moved the conversation to ask what a vision for good work might look like given the history of American ideas around work and vocation. E. F. Schumacher framed the discussion, provoking questions about the scale of economies but also about the kind of education required to form people who choose good work over mere profit. Concluding the meeting were examples of other kinds of work, like that of Auguste Rodin's sculpting, to ask how the work itself might form us and our students in addition to the framework we provide.

Our final conversation was led by Jacob Wolfe (political science) and the Boisi Center's graduate research assistant, Mary Elliot (philosophy). Finding readings to wrap up a year's worth of provoking and rich conversations was difficult. Matthew Crawford and Josef Pieper helped us conclude, raising questions around the relationship between work and leisure, active professions and those that tend towards the life of the mind. But this last conversation took a turn back, again, to education, as all of the participants reflected on the role of a professor in preparing students to face questions of vocation unlike our own. The symposium began with a broad sweep on "vocation in the American imagination," but it concluded with a concrete conviction: American university students, whose roles vary widely post-graduation, call for a kind of education that prepares them for work but also for a deeper way of life, one where the vocational call leads well beyond any finite occupation.

Reading packets for each session are available on the website.

www.bc.edu/boisi-vocationsymposium

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STAFF UPDATES: WHAT'S NEXT?

Jorge Mejía, undergraduate research fellow and graduating senior, will be taking a job as a Legal Compliance Analyst for UBS Bank in New York City. Jorge has been with the center for the past three years, and we will miss his intelligence, creativity and leadership. We are excited to see what his future holds in store for him.

Undergraduate research fellow **Brian Ward**, will be leaving the Boisi Center to focus on his studies and other job, providing technical and lighting design to theatre productions around Boston. We will miss Brian's sharp mind and web skills. Best of luck in your future endeavours, Brian!

Undergraduate research fellow **Monica Orona** will continue on at the Boisi Center during her junior year at Boston College. This summer she will be back in her hometown of Austin, Texas, working on political campaigns.

Interim assistant to the director **Jack Nuelle** will be following his wife back to Chicago (their hometown) as she begins graduate work at Northwestern. He would like to thank the Boisi Center for two lively, engaging, and fun years. He will miss the work, but the staff most of all, and wishes them continued success in years to come.

FALL 2019 EVENTS TBA!

See our website for an updated schedule later this summer.